KISS LEGEND ACE FREHLEY (1951–2025)

GUITAR WORLD

GUITAR & BASS TRANSCRIPTIONS

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THREE SIX FIVE

BUDDY HOLLY
BLUE DAYS, BLACK NIGHTS

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ACE FREHLEY (1951-2025)

A KISS GOODBYE

An era of extravagant rock music comes to a close with the death of Kiss co-founder Ace Frehley. We salute the otherworldly life of the Spaceman

BY ANDREW DALY

NEWS OF ACE Frehley's passing on October 16 wasn't just a shock to the Kiss Army, but to the rock and guitar communities. After all, this was a man who had survived car crashes, police chases, addiction, relapse and two tumultuous stints in the Hottest Band in the World, Kiss.

The general thought was that the guitarist, affectionately known as "Space Ace," would live forever... or at least longer than a mere 74 years. What's more, if he were going to be taken out, surely it wouldn't come at the hands of not one but two seemingly innocuous falls in his home studio, right? Wrong. As Frehley told *Guitar World* in 2024, he had experienced balance issues throughout his entire guitar-playing life.

"I'm mostly a guitar-into-an-amp type of player," he said. "I can't have pedals on the floor; I'd trip over them. You'd be hard-pressed to find a photo of me playing with pedals; I'd be shocked if you could find one. It's rock 'n' roll, so I don't need 'em much anyway."

It was apparent from a young age that Ace — born Paul Daniel Frehley on April 27, 1951, in the Bronx, New York — was born to rock. Like many players of his era, he was influenced by the guitar gods of the British Invasion, especially blues-based players like Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Keith Richards.

ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

As a teen, Frehley, who had experienced a rough home life that led him to join a gang, acquired the nickname "Ace," reportedly because he had a knack for picking up the ladies. Something else he was also pretty good at by the time he reached his teens was playing guitar. He ditched his studies for it, then dropped out of school and made it his life's work.

Soon, Frehley found that a life playing music is kinda hard to come by. As a 22-year-old would-be guitar-slinger, Frehley spent his days driving a cab around New York City. It was around this time that he came upon an ad in *The Village Voice* that read: "LEAD GUITARIST WANTED with Flash and Ability. No time-wasters please. Paul 268-3145."

The Paul in question was Paul Stanley. The band? Soon to be named Kiss. Legend has it that Frehley showed up at the fledgling act's New York City rehearsal space on East 23rd Street with a guitar and two different-colored tennis shoes on his feet, one red and one orange. Frehley has often said that the chemistry between him and the other members of Kiss — Gene Simmons, Peter Criss and Paul Stanley — was immediate. But it was Stanley, the other guitarist in the band, that he initially connected with on a musical level.

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS

"I was always old-school, with a Marshall turned up to 10, playing a Les Paul. That's my sound"

Ace Frehley in 1976 with his 1973 Tobacco Sunburst Gibson Les Paul Deluxe

"I wouldn't be here talking to you right now if I didn't get sober 17 years ago"

"More than anything, it was chemistry," Frehley told *Guitar World* last year. "But it's hard to say; it's always that way with those things. I do know that the little things about my style fit well alongside Paul's."

After joining the group in 1972, Frehley was up and running: he designed the band's lightning-bolt logo and came up with his Spaceman makeup design, lending a hand to Stanley's Starchild image, too. But his most significant contribution was an unschooled, frenetic guitar style that took songs like "Deuce," "Strutter" and "Black Diamond" to the next level. According to Frehley, he didn't put much thought into it, telling *GW*, "I was always old-school, with a Marshall turned up to 10, playing a Les Paul. That's my sound."

By 1973, Kiss had hooked up with manager Bill Aucoin, and within a year, Casablanca Records label head Neil Bogart had agreed to take a chance on the band, inking them to a contract. Kiss fired off three albums in short order — *Kiss* and *Hotter than Hell* (both 1974) and *Dressed to Kill* (1975) — none of which sold well. Sure, the albums featured Frehley's fiery playing and a few monster cuts like "Cold Gin," "Parasite" and "Strange Ways," which he had penned — although he was afraid to sing — and the anthemic "Rock and Roll All Night," but people just weren't into Kiss as a studio band.

With Casablanca on the verge of bankruptcy and the members of Kiss facing the prospect of getting day jobs and seeing their dreams die, a last-ditch effort came in the form of 1975's *Alive!*, a double album that showcased what Kiss did best: play live.

"It broke incredible ground for us," Stanley told *Guitar World* earlier this year. "We were building this rabid following, yet we weren't selling albums that reflected that. *Alive!* was a sonic souvenir where people could go home and say, 'That's what I saw, and that's what I heard!'"

Speaking to *GW* in his last-ever interview in 2025, Frehley echoed Stanley's sentiments. "We felt that our studio albums were good, but they didn't capture the essence of our concerts. I think *Alive!* did. A lot of people jumped on the bandwagon."

Alive! was a multi-platinum smash hit, catapulting Kiss to the top of rock's ranks. As for Frehley, it turned him into a Les Paul-wielding guitar hero overnight. You'd think this would have been good news for him, but looking back, it was the beginning of the end. By 1976, he had developed a drinking habit. Maybe it was his free-wheeling personality, maybe it was the stress of being in the spotlight, maybe the guy just liked to party. Whatever the reason, Frehley's boozing led to him being late to studio sessions for 1976's *Destroyer*. The album's producer, Bob Ezrin, wasn't having it.

"Sometimes I showed up late because I had a hangover from the night before," Frehley told *GW*. "Everybody knows I was an alcoholic. Bob was a guy who liked to get things done quickly, probably because he had a mountain of cocaine and a bottle of Rémy Martin on the mixing desk with him. But, of course, Paul and Gene never mention that."

Destroyer would ride the wave of success created by *Alive!*, though Ezrin did sub in session player Dick Wagner on "Sweet Pain" and the ballad "Beth." This upset Frehley, not only because it happened, but because he didn't know about it.

"I was told Bob did that because he felt my solos weren't as great as they should have been, so he had Dick play them," Frehley said. "But it was more about punishing me for not being on time. I see it as partially my fault but also partly Bob's fault. The thing that bothered me most was that I wasn't told he had replaced my solos; I had to find out after I listened to the record at home on my turntable. That bothered me for a long time."

That wasn't all that was bothering Frehley, as he was electrocuted during a show in Lakeland, Florida, in 1976; the experience inspired his signature track, "Shock Me," which appeared on Kiss's 1977 album, *Love Gun*. The song, noted for its slick guitar solo, also became Frehley's first-ever lead vocal.

Love Gun's producer was Eddie Kramer, who had captured the likes of Jimmy Page

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS

and Jimi Hendrix on tape, so he knew a good guitarist when he heard one.

"Right from the beginning, I knew Ace would be a star — that's for sure," Kramer told *GW* in 2023. "Ace had intuitive talents; he could play blues and rock, and I loved that he could play all these cool blues licks but make them his own. He wasn't scared of anything."

As talented as Frehley was, Kramer had a hell of a time capturing his vocals for "Shock Me." "I'd have him on the floor with a bottle of whatever to calm him," the producer said. "And the more takes we did, the more confident he got. By the second or third take, he was up on his feet, and I said, 'Alright, Ace, keep going. It's cool.'"

Love Gun was another big hit for Kiss, but all was not well. Frehley's drinking and drug use were escalating. Making matters worse — at least for Frehley's bandmates — was that "Shock Me" had lit a fire under the guitarist, leading him to consider quitting the band even though Kiss was on top of the world in 1978. This led to the group's decision to record four individual solo records and release them on September 18 of that year. As fate would have it, on the strength of songs like "Rip It Out," "Snowblind" and the smash hit cover of Hello's "New York Groove," Frehley's self-titled solo record was the best — and most popular — of the bunch.

None of this made Frehley want to — or think he needed to — stay in Kiss. He often said he was "more creative out of Kiss" and that he was "held back" by Stanley and Simmons. There's merit to this, as Kiss's next three albums, 1979's *Dynasty*, 1980's *Unmasked* and 1981's *Music from "The Elder,"* featured more and more Frehley cuts. What's more, those songs, including "2000 Man," "Save Your Love," "Talk to Me" and "Dark Light," were often the best tracks on the album.

Frehley's new confidence collided with his off-the-rails addictions, and in 1982, before the sessions for *Creatures of the Night* began, he told his bandmates he was quitting Kiss. According to Frehley, Stanley and Simmons begged him to stay. Once again, there's merit to that claim: as Simmons told *GW* in 2022, "We had to find a workaround for the Ace [*problem*] — and that wasn't easy because, for all his issues, Ace was a unique player."

Given the strength of his writing and playing toward the end of his days in Kiss, you'd think Frehley's solo career would have taken off like a rocket, but it didn't. What followed was a whole lot of drinking, several near-death car crashes, failed rehab attempts and a separation from his wife, Jeanette. Through the chaos came very little music, but that changed when Frehley met veteran bassist John Regan in 1984, although he was out of sorts, let's say, at the time.

"As I walked in, Ace was lying on the floor," Regan says. "He looked up at me and said, 'Oh, hey, how's it going?' He was so unassuming, and didn't seem to think it was weird the way we were meeting [*Laughs*]. We hit it off straight away and got to talking. It didn't take long for us to start chatting about getting together and playing some music."

Regan recalls his chemistry with Frehley as immediate. The good news for Frehley was that his new partner had his shit together, meaning that when Megaforce Records label head Jon Zazula, after some prodding from Vice President Eddie Trunk, threw up a Hail Mary and signed Frehley to a contract a few years later, there would be someone around to keep him on the straight and narrow.

For a time, Frehley kept it together, leading to the successful solo album, 1987's *Frehley's Comet*. The record almost went gold on the strength of "Rock Soldiers," making it his most successful non-Kiss album. However, the wheels soon came off, leading to more drinking, though Frehley did manage two more solo albums — 1988's *Second Sighting* and the mighty 1989 effort, *Trouble Walkin'*.

By the Nineties, Frehley was in his 40s and drinking heavily; he'd fallen entirely off the musical map thanks to the then-new grunge movement. Interestingly, minus the drinking, Frehley's predicament, albeit on a slightly grander scale, had also befallen his old pals in Kiss, inspiring a reunion in 1995 for an episode of MTV's *Unplugged*. Frehley, along with original drummer Peter Criss, joined the then-current Kiss lineup of Stanley, Simmons, Eric Singer and Bruce Kulick for a surprise run-through of classic songs, including "2000 Man," "Beth," "Hard Luck Woman" and "Rock and Roll All Night."

This led to Stanley and Simmons secretly shacking back up with Criss and Frehley, despite the fact that behind the scenes, the latter was still drinking heavily and using drugs. As for Kulick, he knew there was trouble in paradise.

"I knew something was up," Kulick told *GW* last year. "A reunion was always in the back of my mind. I hoped it would never happen; I always knew it would — especially after *Unplugged*."

Kiss's Reunion Tour saw Frehley gallivanting around the world once again to great success. His future should have been great, but within a few years, and after 1998's *Psycho Circus*, a reunion album gone wrong, the

Frehley plays one of many "New York Groove" Les Pauls in 1996

[*above*] Three of Frehley's *GW* cover appearances — [*from left*] September 1996, August 1993 and June 2016

FUTURE. MICK HUTSON/REDFERNS

Frehley in action in Las Vegas, March 6, 2016, with his signature Les Paul (inspired by his iconic Kiss-era "Budokan" guitar)

wheels came off once again. His drinking and drug use escalated once more, making the supposed Farewell Tour in 2000 and 2001 inevitable — even though the tour wasn't so much a farewell for Kiss but a farewell to Frehley and Criss as members of Kiss.

When Frehley quit Kiss for the second time in 2002, he claimed once again that his bandmates had begged him to stay. It wasn't to be. He assumed that he'd pick up his solo career where it left off, but that wasn't to be, either — at least, not at first.

Frehley didn't sober up until 2006, but once he did, starting with 2009's *Anomaly*, he rattled off a series of triumphant solo records that matched the best of what he'd done in and out of Kiss in the Seventies and Eighties. His most recent record was 2024's *10,000 Volts*, crafted with the help of his co-producer, Trixter guitarist Steve Brown, and one which he felt was his best yet.

Be that as it may, while speaking with *Guitarist* in 2024, Frehley revealed that he was simply happy he'd survived.

"I got rid of my demons," Frehley said. "I used to be a bad drunk and did a lot of drugs. I wouldn't be here talking to you right now if I didn't get sober 17 years ago. When I talk to young musicians, I always tell them, 'Don't fall into the pits that I did.'"

This, along with the fact that Frehley was said to be working on a new album in 2025, makes the news of his death all the more heartbreaking. In the years since quitting Kiss, he'd fallen out with his ex-bandmates, Stanley and Simmons. In particular, Stanley was in his crosshairs.

"A few months before the [*final Kiss*] concert," Frehley told *Guitarist*, "Paul goes on Howard Stern's show and says if me and Peter got up on stage, you might as well call the band Piss. I don't know why he said it. Paul's a good guy; he's a very talented songwriter, singer and frontman. But he's hot and cold. Sometimes he'll say nice things, and sometimes he'll say things that aren't nice."

These comments, along with Kiss's refusal to meet his monetary demands, were probably why Frehley chose to forgo appearing as a guest during Kiss's End of the Road Tour, which concluded at New York's Madison Square Garden in December 2023. Note, however, that Frehley oscillated between saying

"I'm probably gonna go until the wheels come off!"

that Stanley and Simmons wouldn't pay him enough, and that they never asked him at all.

We'll never know the truth. What we do know is that by the time *GW* spoke with Frehley for the last time this past August, he was open to reconciliation.

"I'm the kind of guy that never says 'never,'" Frehley said. "I don't hate Paul or Gene. We're rock 'n' roll brothers. Peter, too. So anything can happen, just not at this point. I'm having too much fun doing my own thing. Maybe I'll get inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a solo artist!"

Maybe the latter will happen, but the former won't. Frehley's tragic passing saw to that. Still, after his death, Simmons and Stanley sent love to their fallen brother. The former said via X, "Our hearts are broken. Ace has passed on. No one can touch Ace's legacy. I know he loved the fans. He told me many times. Sadder still, Ace didn't live long enough to be honored at the Kennedy Center Honors event in December. Ace was the eternal rock soldier. Long may his legacy live on!"

Given the state of their relationship, unsurprisingly, Stanley was a bit less touchy-feely, posting under a picture in which he and Frehley were laughing: "I remember in 1974 being in my room at the Hyatt on Sunset in L.A., and I heard someone playing deep and fiery guitar in the room next door. I thought, 'Boy, I wish *that* guy was in the band!' I looked over the balcony... [*There*] he was. It was Ace. This is my favorite photo of us..."

Then there was the man who stabilized Kiss's lead guitarist spot after Frehley's departure, Bruce Kulick, who tells *GW* exclusively, "I knew Ace's passing would rock the music world. I remember thinking, 'This is like Eddie Van Halen's death. He influenced so many, and he was one of a kind.' What I'm seeing online proves me right. His legacy is monumental."

And, of course, there's Tommy Thayer, Kiss's modern-day Spaceman — who, despite being Kiss's longest-tenured lead guitarist, took a hell of a lot of flak for wearing Frehley's iconic makeup. Frehley himself often jabbed at Thayer, but that didn't stop the latter from taking the high road.

"A legend who will never be forgotten," Thayer said of Frehley via social media. "He inspired generations of guitarists, myself included, to chase greatness. It's been an honor to walk in his footsteps. His legacy will live forever. Rest in peace, Ace."

With all this said, if Frehley's death feels sudden and unfair, that's because it was. If it feels like he had more to do, more shows to play, more music to make, that's because he did. It's tough to fathom a world without him. As the meme says, "You can be a doctor, a lawyer, a pilot, but you can never be Ace Frehley." What did the meme mean? That Frehley — while not the most technical player — had a vibe. He influenced a vast number of guitarists, and he knew it, jokingly telling *Guitar World* in 2024, "If I'd known I was gonna influence thousands of players, I'd have practiced harder." Maybe he should have. But then again, what would the point be? He had the thing that many players who are "better," worked harder and were "respected" wished they had: the "it" factor. As Kulick puts it, "He defined what it means to be a rock star."

Heartbreaking as Frehley's death is, we must remember that he told *GW* in his final interview: "I'm probably gonna go until the wheels come off!" And while we didn't expect it to be so soon, we can take solace in the fact that the guitar-playing Spaceman from Planet Jendell lived as he wanted, with no regrets — until the goddamned wheels came off.

ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

CLASSIC ACE

Longtime *GW* contributor Nick Bowcott remembers the man that launched a thousand licks — and laughs

BY NICK BOWCOTT

A COMMONLY UTTERED warning is "Never meet your heroes," but Ace Frehley is a hero I met on many occasions — and I'm thankful I did. Even though he met countless people, he always greeted me with a big smile and a loud, "Hey, I know this guy! How's it going, Nick?" He also made me laugh — a lot. He was a truly funny guy, not to mention a master storyteller.

The first few times I met Ace, I was either wearing my "*Guitar World* journalist" or "Marshall Amplification Artist Relations" hat. Then we became friends — a priceless gift that still blows me away. The fact that I was also fortunate enough to play rhythm guitar on "Parasite" and "Cold Gin" on stage alongside Ace at a couple of Dimebash charity concerts will always seem surreal too. Can you say, "huge bucket list item"?!

In the early 2000s, I performed a Marshall demo at a big public guitar show in New York City. Ace was there doing a signing, so I opened by playing a segment from his "She" solo spot from *Alive!*. I apologized to him afterwards, saying, "I hope you didn't mind me doing that, my friend. I love that part and couldn't resist playing it." He replied, "I didn't mind at all, Nick. You played it pretty well." Then, after a perfectly timed pause, he added, "But not as well as I do, kid!" before breaking into one of his instantly recognizable, trademark laughs. Classic Ace.

Another unforgettable Ace moment was his touching tribute speech to the much-missed Abbott brothers (of Pantera fame) at Vinnie Paul's funeral service. I had the honor of being the emcee at the ceremony, which was a celebration of an amazing life, and the speech Ace gave that day was unforgettable — thoughtful, emotional and funny.

Aside from a few texts, the last time our paths crossed was after he performed at the Eagles Theater in Wabash, Indiana, in 2022. His band played a proverbial blinder, and so did he. Ace was 71 at the time, but he performed with the energy and passion of someone less than half his age. After he'd signed a pile of stuff backstage, he told me an amazing story about how he'd managed to buy the white-gold watch he had on his wrist for next to nothing because, "the pawn-shop dealer was a total moron who had no freakin' clue what he had or how valuable it was!" Once again, it was classic Ace, and my sides were aching from laughing; boy, could he spin a captivating yarn. I left the venue that night with a spring in my step and a big-assed grin as I'd just been entertained and inspired by a living legend — on and off the stage!

My thoughts are with Ace's loved ones, family, friends and band mates. He was one of a kind, and there'll never be another quite like him. Ace, thank you for the incredible inspiration your playing has blessed me with, and thanks for all the belly laughs! Your music, memory, influence and legend will live on.

Nick Bowcott [*left*] and Ace Frehley, November 3, 2022

[*inset, from left*] Sirius XM's Jose Mangin, Rita Haney, Frehley and Bowcott at Vinnie Paul's memorial service in 2018

COURTESY OF NICK BOWCOTT

NEW YORK GROOVES

Ace Frehley's six greatest Kiss-era guitar moments

BY ANDREW DALY

ONE OF OUR favorite Ace Frehley quotes is something he told us last year: "If I'd known I was going to influence thousands of guitar players, I woulda practiced more!" He was joking, of course, but there's an element of truth to the Spaceman's words. No one ever could've accused Ace, a free-spirited (and, in his youth), hard-partying type, of being meticulous when it came to his playing. The Spaceman was more of a grip-it-and-rip-it guy.

"I'm always flattered when people tell me I influenced them," Frehley told *GW* in September 2024. "I've had so many players come up to me and say, 'You are the reason I play guitar,' and I'm always like, 'Wow...'"

To Frehley's point, everyone from John 5 to Marty Friedman to Richie Kotzen to Tom Morello to Nuno Bettencourt (should we keep going?) was encouraged to pick up the guitar because of Frehley's electrified antics.

No, the man from Planet Jendell didn't possess the skill of Eddie Van Halen, the work ethic of John 5 or the business acumen of Paul Stanley, but it didn't matter. Frehley had a vibe, look, style and tone that transcended all that other stuff. He also had a knack for writing catchy riffs, solos and songs that many kids-turned-rock stars learned in their bedrooms and still play professionally today. Here are six of our favorites.

Cold Gin
***Kiss* (1974)**

It's no secret that Frehley liked to drink in his younger (and yes, some of his older) days. Alas, one of his earliest contributions to Kiss's catalog was "Cold Gin," a hard-riffing drinking song tailor-made for biker-bar singalongs. There have been rumors that Frehley used an Ovation Breadwinner on 1974's *Kiss*, but he ended those rumors last year, when he told *Guitar World* that – that for most of the album – he used a red double-cut Epiphone Coronet like the one the Small Faces' Steve Marriott played. As for the "Cold Gin" riff, Frehley reportedly came up with it in his head on the subway on the way to a Kiss rehearsal. The rest, as they say, is Kisstory.

Strange Ways
***Hotter Than Hell* (1974)**

"Strange Ways" is generally considered one of Frehley's nastiest solos. There's a good reason: it's heavy, cutting, kinda psychedelic and very off the cuff. It's got the vibe of a madman – with a Gibson Les Paul slung over one shoulder – standing in front of a mighty Marshall and letting it feed back as he attacks the strings uninhibited – and that's precisely what happened. By this point, Frehley had his trusty '73 Tobacco Burst Gibson Les Paul Deluxe equipped with DiMarzio Super Distortion/Dual Sound pickups. With those in hand, he let rip and produced what Gene Simmons has often referred to as Frehley's "dinosaur bends," followed by a hard-charging, frenetic guitar solo.

Parasite
Hotter Than Hell

From the album of the same name – and recorded with the aforementioned hot-rodded Les Paul Deluxe – comes this majestic track. It was penned by Frehley, though at the time he wasn't comfortable singing, so he let his guitar do the talking. "Parasite" was a Kiss-concert staple through 1976 and returned to the setlist in the Nineties and early 2000s when Frehley returned to the fold. After leaving Kiss again in 2002, "Parasite" became a Frehley solo staple, with Ace having the courage to sing this time. Guitar-wise, "Parasite" is one of Kiss's heaviest songs, with a curb-stomping proto-metal riff and an off-the-rails solo that finds Frehley demonstrating his version of shredding, which is basically him grinding across all six strings and flying along the neck as quickly as his fingers would allow.

Deuce *Alive!* (1975)

If there's one solo that epitomizes early Kiss – and what Ace was about as a player – it's the outro solo from "Deuce." The song appeared on Kiss's 1974 debut, but that version has this searing solo faded out. The one we're blabbing about here is the live version from *Alive!*, which finds Frehley rattling the walls of a forlorn Rust Belt arena with his '73 Les Paul Deluxe. If you've seen Frehley live with or without Kiss, you've seen him perform this solo. There was simply nothing like watching him slip into another world while he sloppily (a style choice!) lacerated your eardrums with a 100-watt driven Les Paul dustup.

Shock Me
***Love Gun* (1977)**

No one could have accused Frehley of being hyper-focused on technique, but that didn't stop him from writing solos that subscribed to the "song within a song" theory. Aside from being Frehley's first-ever lead vocal, "Shock Me" features a typically repetitive yet catchy riff, leading into a solo that sounds as if it crawled out of the Spaceman's amp and hit you upside the head. As usual, the solo is relatively straightforward and, as he told *Guitar World* in 2024, resulted from Frehley "emptying his head." The word on the street is that Frehley handled the rhythm parts with a Fender Strat but grabbed his Les Paul for the solo, all while plugged into a 100-watt dimed Marshall.

Rocket Ride
***Alive II* (1977)**

Remember how we said Frehley wasn't so technical? For this one, we can throw that out. "Rocket Ride," which comes off a random suite of studio cuts on Side Four (an old term from the age of vinyl) of *Alive II*. The riff is notable as it features a flange effect, something Frehley wasn't known for. And then there's the mid-song solo, which isn't anything special technique-wise, but is interesting as Frehley deployed a wah, creating a sound and vibe that was unique to him. Lastly, there's the end solo, which finds an unaccompanied Frehley dialing into his blues roots and delivering an unusually hyper-focused, yet clearly off-the-cuff guitar solo with a tone that's rich and enticing.

ACE'S ROCK SOLDIERS

The late Ace Frehley's five most iconic Kiss-era guitars

BY ANDREW DALY

Frehley with "the Smoker" and [*below*] "the Rocket Shooting Guitar" in the summer of 1979

1973 Tobacco Sunburst Gibson Les Paul Deluxe

It's long been rumored that Frehley auditioned for Kiss with a late-Sixties Gibson Firebird in nasty condition. And once he'd entered the fold, he reportedly recorded the band's debut record with an Ovation Breadwinner. Whatever. By February 1974, the Spaceman had found a gorgeous Tobacco Sunburst '73 Les Paul Deluxe (pictured on page 18) at Manny's Music in NYC. Frehley's first single-cut had mini humbuckers when he bought it, but Frehley quickly swapped them for a combination of full-sized DiMarzio Super Distortion/Dual Sound pickups. The '73 LP had Kluson double-bar tuners, a pancake body composed of four-ply maple and mahogany and a three-piece maple neck with a rosewood fingerboard. At some point, Frehley contoured the heel with a screwdriver, making it extra comfy until he all but retired the guitar in 1976.

1976 Cherry Sunburst Gibson Les Paul Custom, AKA "The Budokan Guitar"

While it's been rumored that Frehley's '73 Deluxe had been stolen, the truth is he painted it black, didn't like it and then turned it into a double-cut. The result? It was time for a new guitar. Ace went back to Manny's and nabbed a '76 Les Paul Custom with a distinctive two-pickup look; Frehley added a "dead" middle pickup because he "liked the look of it." Again, the stock humbuckers were discarded, with Frehley opting for DiMarzio Super Distortions as he felt they gave him a "hotter sound." Now brandishing the guitar that'd become synonymous with the Kiss sound/aesthetic, Frehley hit the road for some of the largest shows of the band's career, sporting it in Japan (where it was dubbed his "Budokan Guitar"), Europe and the U.S. Frehley would use guitars modeled after his '76 Les Paul well into Kiss's Reunion era and beyond.

1977 Black Les Paul Custom, AKA "The Smoker"

Frehley first developed the idea for what became known as "The Smoker" in 1976 and reportedly used a Black '76 Les Paul Custom. Ever the mad scientist, Frehley is said to have modified the guitar himself. While the guitar initially acted as intended, the homemade electronics eventually proved faulty. The Spaceman gave it a second go in '77 using another Black Les Paul Custom. This time, the guitar and its hot-wired innards held up, seeing that the '77 version stuck around through the Seventies and into the early Eighties.

So yeah, it held up, but that didn't mean "The Smoker" was safe. To keep himself from being burned by the gobs of smoke spewing from the guitar's middle dummy pickup during the "Shock Me" solo, Frehley installed a cardboard shield. It's worth noting that his smoking guitar returned during the Reunion era, along with another insane guitar — a '57 Gibson Black Beauty that shot rockets, which we'll get to later.

Late-Fifties Les Paul Special (TV Yellow), AKA "The New York Groove Guitar"

As far as we can tell, the exact year of Ace Frehley's infamous "New York Groove" light-up guitar is unknown. But we know Frehley took what would now be considered a sacred guitar — a late-Fifties TV Yellow Les Paul Special — and had the face routed to hold upwards of 1,000 incandescent lights. This was before the advent of LEDs, so Frehley went with bulbs powered by a Ni-Clad battery pack, leading to a mostly reliable unit. To be sure, the guitar was the brainchild of Frehley, but instead of doing it himself, this time he solicited the services of Milton Bradley toy designer John Elder Robinson. The guitar first surfaced in 1979 while on the *Dynasty* tour and was exclusively used by Frehley when playing "New York Groove" from his '78 solo record. While generally reliable and certainly cool looking, the guitar wasn't always user-friendly, and the old-school lights often became red hot, leading to burns. In recent years, Frehley played an updated version of the guitar; it was decked out with battery-powered LEDs.

1957 Les Paul Black Beauty, AKA "The Rocket-Shooting Guitar"

It's a bit unsettling to think that a 1957 Black Beauty was used in this way, but, hey, it's legendary all the same. In Ace Frehley's early rocket-shooting days, he'd shoot bottle rockets from his headstock while tufts of smoke spewed from "The Smoker." Eventually, that wasn't enough, leading him to push the proverbial envelope. The most famous of his rocket-shooting Gibson Les Pauls would be the '57 Black Beauty, which can be seen in Reunion-era videos on YouTube; examples include Tiger Stadium in 1996 and Madison Square Garden in 1997.

"The Rocket-Shooting Guitar" featured classic Grover kidney-bean tuners and Ace's typical dummy middle pickup surrounded by DiMarzio Super Distortions. But this time, Frehley had Steve Carr

RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES. RICHARD CREAMER/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY

LOST CLASSICS

FREHLEY'S COMET

In his final interview for *Guitar World* magazine (conducted in early 2025 and not published until now), Ace Frehley looked back on the 1987 album that brought him back into the limelight

BY ANDREW DALY

Frehley in New York City with a Washburn Wonderbar-equipped Gibson Les Paul, January 16, 1987

EBET ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

AFTER QUITTING KISS in 1982 due to his heavy drinking, drug use and stifled creativity, Ace Frehley was seen as a liability in the music industry. He thought leaving Kiss would be fruitful, but things hadn't gone to plan. Despite his influential guitar style, swagger, showmanship and songwriting ability, no record company would touch him.

By 1984, Frehley had begun to sober up. He connected with bassist John Regan, guitarist Richie Scarlet and drummer Anton Fig (who had played drums on Frehley's '78 solo record and Kiss's *Dynasty* and *Unmasked*) and formed what would become Frehley's Comet.

Frehley also had tunes. Regan and Scarlet helped him refine songs like "Breakout," which dated back to Frehley's Kiss days and had been co-written by Kiss drummer Eric Carr. But that wasn't all, as Frehley was also working with songwriter Chip Taylor on another soon-to-be classic, "Rock Soldiers," based on Frehley's newly adopted "say no to drugs and alcohol" lifestyle — and a certain car chase through Connecticut involving a DeLorean. But Frehley needed a record deal, and no one came calling — except Johnny Zazula's Megaforce Records. Even so, Megaforce only wanted Ace because a young Eddie Trunk, who was Megaforce's vice president at the time, vouched for him, resulting in a six-album deal and the initial sessions for 1987's *Frehley's Comet*.

With Eddie Kramer in the control room and a reshuffled band consisting of Regan (bass), Fig (drums) and Tod Howarth (guitars), who replaced Scarlet after his drug-related firing, Ace hit Right Track Recording Studios in New York City and reeled off one of the finest studio albums of his career.

On the strength of songs like "Rock Soldiers," "Breakout" and "Calling to You," *Frehley's Comet* proved that Ace was a viable commercial entity amid the Eighties hard rock and glam-metal scene. Now his influence wasn't only in the past but on full display across stages and on MTV, the latter of which was new to Ace, too.

Frehley's Comet nearly went gold upon its release — and many, including Trunk, have called for a re-evaluation, meaning it's widely believed that if it didn't go gold in the Eighties, it sure as hell has gone gold by now. But no matter, as "Rock Soldiers" echoed, Ace was back —

and just in time, as his album was in direct competition with Kiss's 1987 album, *Crazy Nights*.

Frehley's record didn't outperform Kiss's, but it did leave Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley wanting what they once had while knowing full well they wouldn't get it... yet. As for Frehley, he was just happy to be back in action.

"That album was the first after I left Kiss," he said. "It took me a while to get my act together, because I was getting off drugs. But in the end, it was a good record. It might have taken me several years after I left Kiss to put that record together, but I was – and I am – happy with the way it turned out."

Why did you choose John Regan and Richie Scarlet for the initial version of Frehley's Comet, and why did you replace Richie with Tod Howarth when it came time to record?

I met John at Northwick Studios. I was impressed with his bass playing, and I asked him to be in the band, which really worked out. And with Richie Scarlet being in the band, I was in the process of getting sober, and Richie wasn't sober. I talked to John about it, and he said, "Let's get somebody that doesn't get loaded." So I fired Richie and hired Tod. Richie was a showman and a little wilder than Tod, who was a little more reserved. But Tod is a talented guy.

Eddie Trunk has a big hand in Frehley's Comet being signed to Megaforce Records. Did you have trouble getting a deal before then?

Not really. Once Johnny Zazula, who passed away a few years ago, heard the demos of our stuff, and Eddie said he knew me well, I got signed. Eddie was vice president of Megaforce, so they gave me a shot, and the record was a success.

You co-wrote "Breakout" with Eric Carr while Kiss was recording *Music from "The Elder,"* but you recorded it for *Frehley's Comet*. What's the story there?

I actually went to Eric's apartment, and he was fooling around with that riff, and I just took it to the next level. I kind of rewrote the song and added some guitar parts. I think I wrote most of the lyrics, though Eric might have written half of them. I don't remember the exact breakdown with the lyrics, but I know Eric came up with the riff, and I worked on it from there, and we finally recorded it for *Frehley's Comet*.

How about "Rock Soldiers," which has become a signature song for you?

[*Singer/songwriter*] Chip Taylor came to my house, and we wrote that together. "Rock Soldiers" was originally called "Just Say No." I was going to AA, and I wanted to do a song about sobriety, and Chip said, "Why don't we do a song called 'Just Say No?'" I think that was a slogan people used at the time to say no to drugs. So we started the song with that, and then, when we were recording it, Chip walked into the room and goes, "I've got a brainstorm. Let's try singing "Rock soldiers come, rock soldiers go." So we switched it from "Just Say No" to "Rock Soldiers Go," and that's how that song was born. Chip was an interesting guy. When I first started working with him, I had no idea he also wrote "Wild Thing," which was recorded by the Troggs.

"I didn't really think about it. I did my best guitar work there without thinking. I just emptied my head!"

Eddie Kramer, who produced your 1978 solo record, produced *Frehley's Comet*. What was it like working with him again?

I hadn't changed my guitar sound. It was always the same. Eddie helped tweak my guitar tone. He showed me a lot of micing techniques I wasn't familiar with, like blending two different mics together. Eddie liked to use a Shure SM57 and a ribbon mic and blend the two together. Those mics have different qualities; every microphone has its own sound. But the SM57 is universally used on guitar amps, and they're inexpensive too. By the same token, every speaker sounds different. Depending on the angle at which you place the mic, that can be very important. People don't realize that. People just think, "If the mic is in front of the speaker, it always sounds the same." But depending upon the angle of the mic, you get a little bit of a different tone. So if you experiment with that stuff, which Eddie did, you get different tones. He taught me how to put a mic far away and blend it with a mic that's close to the speaker so that you get ambiance. I did that a lot.

One of the most singular solos on *Frehley's Comet* is on Tod's song, "Calling to You." Do you remember how you approached that?

I didn't really think about it. I did my best guitar work there without thinking. I just emptied my head! As long

Frehley's Comet in San Francisco, April 23, 1987; [*from left*] Frehley, Tod Howarth, John Regan and Billy Ward

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Frehley's Comet in action at the Chance in Poughkeepsie, New York, June 21, 1987; note the Laney cabinets in the background

EBET ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

as I knew what key I was playing in, I'd do three or four takes, sometimes even half a dozen, and we just picked the best one. A lot of times, we even used Fender guitars. I'd blend the Fender and Les Paul on a rhythm, and then I'd double the solo with a Tele or Strat, so I probably did that for a thicker sound.

The promotional pictures of you from that era show you endorsing Laney amps. Do you use Laneys in the studio, or did you stick with Marshalls?

I may have used a Laney, but I know I also recorded with Marshalls at that time. I also recorded with a Fender tweed. Sometimes I'd do a track with the Marshall, and then I'd do a track with a smaller amp. But there was a Laney around, and I know I tried the Laney, but Marshalls are just more consistent with their sound.

You were also pictured holding a Les Paul with what looked like a Floyd Rose on it. Did you use that on *Frehley's Comet*?

It actually wasn't a Floyd Rose; it was a torsion whammy bar, and it was a big hunk of metal. [*Laughs*] I remember using it when I did "Rock Soldiers." But when I used the whammy bar, it became too easy to depend on it to get tremolo. With the bar, you do it with your right hand, and my tremolo with my left hand suffered. So I just ripped that thing off the guitar. I focused on developing many different styles of tremolo with my left hand. I could do fast, slow, up and down. I could even tremolo with my pinky! [*Laughs*] I didn't even realize I was doing it at first, but I started barring with my pinky, since I have a long pinky.

***Frehley's Comet* was your first album after quitting Kiss and, at the time, your first solo album in almost 10 years. What did its success mean to you?**

I always enjoyed working with Eddie, so that was great. He always thought outside the box. He was willing to try different techniques, amps and configurations of mics and amps. I found a different harmonic range and blended some things together — and that was great. GW